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The Paradoxes of Indian Politics: a dialogue between Political Science and History

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Summary

Historians and political Science follow different tracks in South Asian Studies. Barring a few, historians tend to stop in 1947 and political scientists tend to pick up the story from this point onwards, albeit concentrating largely on the events of just the last twenty years. This predominance of political scientists in analyzing Indian politics has reinforced the myth that politics in India is riddled with paradoxes. Thus the constitutional commitment to individualism is apparently constantly contradicted by the communitarian ethos of politics, the official policy of secularism is compromised by repeated occurrences of communal violence, and the emphasis on a universal adult franchise is undermined by the persistence of political dynasties. The top-heavy state, the politics of identities, the etiolating institutional capacity of the state to govern, and the degenerated condition of class politics are often used as critical templates by which to measure political dynamics in India. National

security is a key term often referenced, but poorly defined, in such theoretical constructions of the Indian polity.

This paper claims that a dialogue between historians and political scientists can provide for a far better comprehension of Indian politics than is offered by these functionalist templates. Rather than viewing Indian society and politics through ready-made theoretical lenses, the paper argues for a more expansive, temporal view of the articulation of different forms of political practice in India. It argues that a temporal analysis can instead establish that the apparent paradoxes of Indian politics are no more than the expression of long-standing dialectical and dialogical process of engagement by different actors in political society. These articulate complex but integrated patterns of political transaction that are by no means contradictory but have become established and clearly recognized by political actors over time.

Introduction

On 15 August 1947, at the moment of the birth of Indian republic, Premier Jawaharlal Nehru hyperbolically announced to the nation that India's dark past was over and India's assignation with nation making had begun. Interestingly, Nehru's brilliant metaphor became a reality for scholars studying India. Barring a few exceptions, historians often stop in 1947, indicating the end of a 'history' i.e. India's past. Political Scientists only commences their analyses in 1947 as if a line had been drawn in the flow of time indicating the beginning of 'modern' India. This division of labour has been a convenient shorthand with which to hammer into shape the complicated flow of events, however the work of political scientists examining events post 1947 has not been without flaws.

Underlying the academic division of labour in 1947 there is a theoretical assumption common among historians that politics in post-colonial India was somehow radically different from that of the late colonial era. Post-colonial India was a sovereign democratic republic operating under a citizen's constitution. Under the provisions of this constitution the state regularly held elections in order to provide opportunities for its citizens to determine the succession of governments. This is perceived to be a quantitative leap forward from the paternalistic despotic structure of the colonial state.

While there is no doubt that the assumption of a qualitative difference in the nature of pre and post-independence governments is partially true, it is also evident that the first generation of post-colonial India's politicians were products of the late colonial era. India witnessed the rise of mass politics after the First World War. Many politicians who held high positions in the Government of India after independence learnt their craft in the inter-War era. Political parties also matured their tactics of mass mobilisation during the high tides of the nationalist movement. Even many aspects of the constitutional edifice of the post-colonial polity were established in the late colonial period.

For the study of India post 1947, historians complain about methodological problems the lack of access to archives that constitute the primary materials of the historian's crafts. This is due to the fact that after 1955 most government departments gave up the practice of regularly wedding and transferring records after a lapse of 20 or 30 years to state and national archives so that they might be available for public access (in itself an interesting departure from British colonial practice). All government records after 1955 are therefore a part of current departmental repositories, to which normally only government officers have access. This includes even

reports on the debates of state legislative assemblies. The collections of private papers held at the Nehru Memorial Library in New Delhi offer one of the few opportunities to methodically and systematically chart the workings of government and society, yet outside Teen Murti there are few repositories in which a complete run of regional newspapers are available. Yet historians can import methodologies from various social science disciplines to reconstruct a temporal framework approach for the post independence period. More importantly, the Indian polity was and is embedded within wider societal structures characterised by divisions along lines of caste, class region, religion, and gender. These social fault lines came to inform politics in a significant way over a period of nearly a century. Thus the state-society relationship that constitutes the critical bedrock of politics cannot be viewed in isolation from the longer temporal framework of social and economic transformations in India. Unfortunately, excepting a few, historians have tended to surrender the field and have failed to engage in a dialogue with political scientists, sociologists and anthropologists that might make a thoroughly historicised understanding of post-independence developments possible.

It terms of methodology, political scientists have displayed a far more nuanced and interdisciplinary approach. Many have borrowed field survey techniques from anthropology that have enabled them to develop a more penetrating analysis of contemporary affairs. However, political scientists approach Indian politics with readymade theoretical frameworks that were often grounded in more euro-centric notions of democracy and nation formation. Thus soon after Independence when political scientists looked at the complex ethno-social mosaic of Indian society they developed deep doubts about the possible survival of the new nation state. In Europe and North America, nation-states had identifiable commonalities in terms of language and ethnicity, but in India these were

spectacularly absent. It was long held that democratic forms of governance are integrally related to the prosperity of industrialised societies. Yet India remained industrially under-developed and poverty endemic for many decades after independence. Scholars were often surprised by the growth of democracy, let alone its continuation, in such a poor nation. The sensational titles of many popular and even some academic publications on India, predicting catastrophe for the new nation, starkly reveal the widespread influence of this prejudice.

Confounded by the complexity of the Indian situation and influenced the functionalist theory of modernisation dominant in American academe, many pioneering political scientists, such as Myron Weiner, Morris W Jones and Lloyd I Rudolph and Susan Rudolph chose to look at Indian politics through the prism of culture. Within cultural contexts they reworked the notions of tradition and modernisation in a complex fashion. These pioneering analysts thus sought to understand how a democratic state can withstand the pressures of a transitional 'primordial society', which was characterised by a complex ethno-religious mosaic and emerging modern interest groups. Others, such as Rajni Kothari and Kochanek used the same functionalist templates to understand the party political system and the links between the party political system and interest groups. Their initial focus was thus directed towards the Congress Party of India's preeminent political apparatus of governance.

With the decline of Congress party's political hegemony from the 1970s onwards, many scholars looked at the operation of factions to understand India's political dynamics. A giant figure among them was Paul Brass, who in his 1965 study *Factional Politics in an Indian State* proffered possibly one of the very best analyses of the operation of factions in a North Indian polity. Finally, as India

progressed into seemingly endless political crises and supposedly spasmodic economic development, scholars turned their attention to the restricted capabilities of the state to deliver development and how the pressure from societal interest groups paralysed India's economic development. Borrowing from Samuel P. Huntington's *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968), and *The Crisis of Democracy: On the Governability of Democracies* (1976), Atul Kohli explored the idea of India having an overloaded state within a hyper mobilised society. Finally, with the demise of the dirigiste economy and the simultaneous rise of liberalisation, political scientists and political sociologists such as Rob Jenkins turned their attention to behavioural characteristics of actors within the corridors of power and the workings of institutions¹. Finally scholars such as Ashutosh Varshney brought society to the centre stage of politics and relocated the state's capacity to prevent riots within the context of societal relationships between rival ethno-religious groups.

No doubt such approaches generated powerful insights that have helped us to better understand Indian politics. We selected these few scholars not because of their ideological predilections, but because their towering presence in many ways have substantially informed our understanding of Indian politics. Nonetheless, with a few exceptions such as Varshney, these highly sophisticated and nuanced analyses, in general, ignored the resistance of subaltern groups and tended to view social movements as merely contributing to the complex problem of hyper politicisation within Indian society. Complex developments within the local politics were reduced simply to the operation of patron client relationships and political brokerage. Even Marxists such Sudipto Kaviraj and Achin Vanaik preferred to view politics through the lens of passive revolution or used terms such as 'degenerated working class

¹ Democratic Politics and Economic Reform in India Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1999.

parties', thereby reducing the agency of popular movements and parties and imposing their own theoretical preferences onto their complex and seemingly unruly subject matter.

An alternative approach suggested here is that a dialogue between historians and political scientists can provide a far better comprehension of Indian politics than is offered by the functionalist templates that have been widely employed hitherto by Indian scholars. Rather than viewing Indian society and politics through ready-made theoretical lenses, a case can be made instead for a more expansive, temporal view of the articulation of different forms of political practice in India. From this perspective it may be argued that the apparent paradoxes of Indian politics are no more than the expression of long-standing dialectical and dialogical process of engagement by different actors in political society. These articulate complex but integrated patterns of political transaction that are by no means contradictory but have become established and clearly recognised by political actors over time, in many cases beginning even in preceding centuries and continuing up to the present day.

I

Tradition and the Modern in the Making of Political Culture

The most popular reworked version of tradition and modernity surfaced in the writings of Myron Weiner who was possibly one of the most formidable intellectual influences studying South Asia in the second half of the twentieth century. Weiner's first monograph, published in 1957, analysed opposition politics in India². The study was based on detailed personal interviews with numerous opposition politicians, primarily from Left and Centre-Left parties.

² Myron Weiner, *Party Politics in India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957.

But his theoretical considerations were rooted in an assumption that education was eroding earlier sources of social status based on caste or tribal loyalties, and that politics had become the new source of power. But political parties in India represented not simply political ideologies but also factions and personal loyalties to leaders. In a powerful monograph in 1962 Myron Weiner studied Indian politics through an examination of West Bengal politics³. His study of politics in West Bengal was deeply influenced by the approaches of functionalism and offered an input-output analysis of the political system. He was associated with Gabriel Almond and his colleagues on the Committee on Comparative Politics of the American Social Science Research Council who dominated the study of comparative politics in the United States in the 1960s. Weiner wrote a classic text on how pressure groups sought to engage in bargaining with the state. He promoted the view that there were two kinds of interest groups: one based on modern associational politics such as trade unions, student movements, peasant associations and thus were characterised by modern political rhetoric, whilst the other was that of tribes, castes, and organisational associations of the locality. He thought both kinds of group were authentic and legitimate representatives of democratic aspirations and that there should be an accommodation of their interests.

Soon after publishing *The Politics of Scarcity*, Weiner wrote a powerful essay introducing the concepts of elite culture and mass culture to the study of Indian politics⁴. Both these cultures Weiner argued were permeated by a modernising ethos and traditional cultural values. For Weiner, mass political culture represented society's attitudes towards governance at a local and state level where local politicians operated within the ambience of caste, tribe,

³ Myron Weiner, *The Politics of Scarcity: Public Pressure and Political Response in India*, 1962.

⁴ Myron Weiner "India's Two Political Cultures" in Myron Weiner (ed.), *Political Change in South Asia*, Calcutta: Firma K L Mukhopadhyaya, 1963 pp. 112-140.

ethnicity and language. He argued that elite political culture could be located within the national capital, generated the discourse of development in the English language, and plugged into globally dominant paradigms of development. Weiner claimed that these two cultures would be likely to clash as elite developmental culture operates within a utopian vision of development spawned by the governing elites whilst mass political culture was demanding power and patronage for ethnic groups and tribes. Thus he feared that the governing elite would be likely to impose authoritarian regime as their failure to control mass culture became evident. In other words, Indian politics was viewed through the prism of modernity and tradition but in a more sophisticated and nuanced manner than before. But whilst Weiner tended to seek these groups as being motivated in completely opposite directions, it could be argued that historically such multiple interests groups and contradictory articulations of politics were merely a part of the usual rhetoric of bargaining and resistance exercised by political entrepreneurs arising from amongst the subaltern classes. These were neither new nor diametrically opposite but were dialectically related to the logic of domination and hegemony.

The most important contribution in Weiner's work lay in his understanding of the functioning of the Congress Party of India. To understand the operation of the Congress Party, he studied politics in five states in two cities (Calcutta in West Bengal and Madurai in Tamil Nadu) and three rural-urban contexts (Belgaum in Karnataka, Khairatpur in Gujarat, and Guntur in Andhra Pradesh). His methods were anthropological, using detailed in-depth interviews. Weiner conducted this research for eighteen months in 1961-62. Based on this detailed field research he maintained that the success of the Congress within competitive party political structure could be located in the way the party managed different interest groups at district level. He believed that districts had their unique social

mosaics and cultural loyalties that could not transcend their geographical boundaries. Thus Congress's success lay in the successful management of caste, tribes and linguistic pressure groups within districts. This sums up his understanding of Indian society as an aggregation of localised interest groups locked within their castes and linguistic identities, articulated by local political actors within the framework of the Congress Party machine. Congress was thus a supra local alliance of political actors operating at grass roots level. This view obviously discounts ideologies and the abilities of local actors to make independent cross-district alliances. Politics was merely an aggregate of interest groups confined to their caste, language and regional identities representing mass political culture, which were in dialogue with elite political culture focused on development and nation building.

This understanding of India in terms of diverse and contrasting political cultures received a further clarification W. H. Morris-Jones's work on government and politics in India published in 1964⁵. Morris-Jones expounded the idea that there were three languages of politics in India: the modern westernised language in which politicians talked about constitutions, law courts and administration, the traditional language in which caste or jati as it is understood in rural India plays a dominant role, and the saintly language adopted by many a politicians to prompt Indian people to demand better moral conduct from their governing elites. Morris-Jones claimed that the contrasting pulls of traditional culture and modern culture often created conflicts of loyalty among politicians. Village sub-castes argued Morris-Jones thus play a critical role in shaping politics in India.

⁵ W. H Morris-Jones, *The Government and Politics of India*, London: Hutchinson University Library, 1964.

It was not long before Susanne and Lloyd Rudolph in *The Modernity of Tradition* (1984) challenged the misplaced polarities between modernity and tradition in Indian society so fondly espoused by earlier functional theorists. They argued that modernity and traditions are inextricably interrelated in ways that are significant to modernisation. They applied this thesis to the development of caste associations, the traditional roots of Gandhi's charisma, and the functioning of British law courts and legal traditions in the country. They argued that caste functions as a para-community in India whereby the mass media and transportation system reinforce caste consciousness. This transformed caste associations into collective entities through which people are mobilised into parliamentary democratic politics. Similarly, they presented Gandhi as a moderniser who selectively used Indian traditions to initiate the process of modernisation. Finally, they demonstrated how British judicial courts reinforced Brahminical law and thus combined elements of both British and Brahminical legal practices. They thereby effectively demonstrated that tradition and modernity are not antipodes of each other but are intertwined in terms of their impact on Indian politics. The book, a collection of three essays, thus undermined the possibility of any simplistic reading of tradition versus modernity in understanding Indian politics.

Despite the sophistication of the Rudolph's reinterpretation of the dialogue between tradition and modernisation, the theme of modernisation under the British and Indian parliamentary system remained central to the writings of a majority of political scientists. For example, nearly quarter of a century after Independence, writing in 1970 in *Asian Survey*, an influential political scientist, Robert Hardgrave, brilliantly posited these seeming contradictions in explaining the Marxist movement in Kerala:

Kerala is a land of contradiction in a nation of contrasts. It is miniature of India with all its varieties pushed to the extreme. ...It has the highest literacy rate and the highest rate of unemployment. With the largest community of Christians, it has the Communists vote also. It is once a bastion of orthodox Hinduism, with the most elaborate caste ranking in India and a region deeply affected by social mobilization and change. With many of the “prerequisites” of political modernization, Kerala is regarded by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) - or CPM - as an advanced outpost of revolutionary struggle⁶.

The operative word here is modernisation. Interestingly instead of viewing these contrasts as the product of a societal arrangement where domination and resistance constituted critical components of the same societal structure, even a scholar like Hardgrave juxtaposed them as contrasting examples of tradition and modernity. Even while engaging with history, Hardgrave in his illuminating study of the Nadar ‘community’ in Tamil Nadu spoke of its transition from being a disjointed low caste ritually poor social group into a well organised community under the impact of modernising forces of Christianity and colonial rule, which then again fragmented into social groups divided along class lines under the impact of post colonial democracy⁷. The unifying theme of his entire thesis was the impact of forces of modernisation on community formation. Hardgrave thus subjected his materials to a theoretical straight jacket and almost avoids entirely the

⁶ The Marxist Dilemma in Kerala: Administration and/or Struggle, by Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr. *Asian Survey*, 1970, University of California Press.

⁷ *The Nadars of Tamilnad: The Political Culture of a Community in Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969)

fundamental question of what constitutes a community. Can we really call Nadars a community? Or is it possible that various locally disjointed oppressive group merely self-mobilised by using this template in order to secure their interests? The Nadar community was possibly a rhetorical construct rather than a practical socio-political entity.

Using an approach similar to Hardgrave, Markus Franda in an important study, ignored the growth of communist politics in Bengal as a manifestation of the elite assertion of regional identity and posited instead a theory of the acculturation of the Bengali bhadralok under Western impact as the reason for their infatuation with Marxism⁸. Studying culture became another cryptic shorthand for the reassertion of the thesis of modernisation albeit in a more historically nuanced manner. Again Franda simplified his rich empirical data in order to subject it to his theoretical straight jacket. If he had not done so, he might have recognized that Marxism in Bengal had not only an impact on the high caste bhadralok but was still more popular with rural, ritually low caste communities who produced some of the most effective peasant leaders of the CPI (M) such Harekrishna Konar. No doubt Hardgrave and Franda provided us with rich examples of the dialogue between history and politics, as well as locating politics within the ambit of wider state society relationships, but their continued regard for modernisation theory leads to the pruning of rich details of historical reality for the sake of theoretical coherence.

II

System and Faction

⁸ Marcus Franda *Radical Politics in West Bengal*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1971.

In 1964 Rajni Kothari condensed his series of articles on the Indian party political system published in the journal *Economic and Political Weekly* into a single article on the Congress system published in *Asian Survey*⁹. He argued here that the Congress Party had the ability and willingness to accommodate diverse and contradictory interest groups within its fold and at the same time could incorporate pressures from opposition leaders. He demonstrated that inter party competitions and inner party factionalism had a dynamic relationship within the Indian political system. Inter Party competitions were thus incorporated within inner party factional struggles and these factions in their turn create a democratic dialogue within the party for policy making and personal political relationships. In his monograph published in 1970,¹⁰ Rajni Kothari further explained the Congress system as a uniquely Indian system, which could be resilient and flexible enough to accommodate pressures from diverse groups from secessionists to Marxists and could thus create a stable political system within the midst of crisis. While Kothari's model can be applied to explain high politics in the Nehruvian era, it seems such assertions ignore the complex realities of Indian politics. Different forms of regional social movements and resistance to Congress rule not only exposed the vulnerabilities of the Congress Party but also led to the death of the Nehru Congress with Mrs. Gandhi forming her own Congress (the Requisitionists) in 1969. The new Congress was a radically different outfit with very little intention to absorb factions and regional leaders. Accommodative politics was over. Nonetheless, rather than looking at the Congress as a supra-local alliance among different types of local actors operating within diverse and segregated localities, Kothari sought to provide us with

⁹ Rajni Kothari, 'The Congress System...' *Asian Survey*, Vol. 4, No. 12 (Dec., 1964), pp. 1161-1173

¹⁰ Rajni Kothari, *Politics in India*, Boston: Little Brown & Company, 1970.

a theory of the party-political system in India in its totality which simply did not fit the historical facts.

The term ‘one party democracy’ that Kothari coined and used to explain the Congress system was again invoked by Stanley Kochanek in his study of the Congress Party published in 1968¹¹. Kochanek studied the relationship between the party Congress President and the Prime Ministers, the role of the Congress central working committee and such related bodies as the parliamentary board and finally the socio-economic background of the Congress leadership. Kochanek studied the relationship between the party executive and the government executive in terms of three time periods: the period of transition (1946-51), the period of centralisation and convergence, 1951-63), and the period of divergence 1963-67. His basic argument highlights the success of the Congress under Nehru, during which period Nehru allowed the working committee to operate in a creative manner. The third phase, argues Kochanek, was the era of equilibrium between the central and state governments. Sadly, however, Kochanek provides us with little understanding of the operation of the entire political system of the country. It provides intricate details of the party political mechanism but not the wider societal impetus and the forces of changes that lay outside the party political mechanism and yet profoundly influenced the political process.

As the term ‘the Congress system’ gained popularity, ironically the very operation of the system was being explained in terms of factions and rivalries within the factions. Obviously Kothari used factions in terms of inter party and inner party political competitions. But a more substantive lead came from Paul Brass. In a major study of UP politics published in 1965 Brass argued that in

¹¹ Stanley Kochanek, *The Congress Party of India: the dynamics of one Party Democracy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968.

the absence of external threats, the presence of an internal consensus on ideological issues, and the absence of authoritative leadership, the UP Congress was composed of factions stretching from villages to state level¹². Faction leaders exercised a tight control over their immediate followers, which often resembles guru-disciple type relationships of intense quasi-religious devotion. He further asserts that in traditional society decisions about factional disputes are not resolved through institutional laws but by personal arbitration from a reputed neutral leader, who are few and far between. In other words factions are immobilising the functioning of the decision making process. But factions are also enabling Congress Party to recruit new activists as different factions are engaged in the process of recruiting new followers. More importantly, factions are cutting across caste, class and regional boundaries. Paul Brass thus brilliantly introduced a new concept of functionalist discourse into the study of Indian politics, namely the role of factions. His theoretical apparatus remained the old theory of tradition and modernity but it operated with new analytical tool. Factions can certainly provide a useful critical tool to help explain the rise of social movements or new types of ideological templates based on caste, such as that proposed by the Jat leader from U.P., Charan Singh. However, the concept of the faction tends to project a view of Indian society devoid of ideological clashes or the economic and cultural moorings of politics. Despite Paul Brass' brilliant engagement with politics, his original interpretation provides us with a largely reductionist view of Indian society. Later Brass moved away from factional analysis and concentrated on deeper theoretical explanations of regional politics.

III

¹² Paul Brass, *Factional Politics in an Indian State: The Congress Party in Uttar Pradesh*. Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1965.

Political Economy: the State, Dominant Classes and Social Movements

With the introduction of emergency rule by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975 and the increasing assertions of state power by the central government in every aspect of the society, the 1970s saw a new focus on the state as a critical political arena in contemporary research on India. Scholars concentrated particularly on the analysis of the relationship between the state and dominant proprietary classes. In 1975 Hamza Alavi, the noted Marxist scholar of South Asia, argued that in post-colonial societies where the indigenous bourgeoisie was weak, the military-bureaucratic axis that came into existence with the emergence of colonial rule would become an autonomous power and would subjugate the other 'exploiting classes' such as the landed classes, indigenous and metropolitan bourgeoisie. This thesis of the state as the playground of elite interest groups in the Indian context found more coherent shape in the neo-Marxist writings of Pranab Bardhan. Bardhan identified three dominant proprietary classes: the industrial capitalists, rich farmers and professional bureaucratic elites. Competition and conflict among these dominant classes influenced the ability of the state to act independently. Soon after independence India's political elites enjoyed a substantial degree of autonomy because the dominant classes were not very much organised. Increasingly, in the post-colonial era these classes became more mobilised and thus made demands on resources that were needed for public sector investments and long term planning. This led to increasing corruption with the state becoming a virtual patronage distribution mechanism by means of subsidies and inefficiently managed public enterprises of various sorts.

In contrast to Bardhan, Susanne and Lloyd Rudolph in *The Pursuit of Lakshmi* (1987) highlighted the paradox of a weak-strong state

presiding over a rich-poor economy. The economy is described as rich-poor because of the highly developed industrial sector co-existing with subsistence level agriculture. According to the Rudolphs the state was weak-strong because despite having substantial bureaucratic personnel, the state was unable to penetrate rural society effectively. The rising level of political mobilisation in rural society further served to undermine state influence. The deinstitutionalization of the Congress party under Mrs. Gandhi, growing agrarian conflicts along caste and class lines, and increasingly powerful religious nationalist movements in the 1980s was the final imposition of clear limits the extent of state control.

Despite its weaknesses, the state, according to Rudolphs is nonetheless a critical player in politics. Social engineering initiated by the state brought into existence a powerful class whose interests are tied to its functioning. While this social class attempts to garner resources through the state in the name socialism, ordinary citizens form pressure groups that the Rudolphs label 'demand groups'. These demand groups organise street level agitations to achieve their goals. They do not seek to organise lobbies, influence patronage networks or develop institutional networks to influence political power. They cite the campaigns of rich peasants in Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra (a common demand being debt relief¹³) as examples of such one-issue movements.

Both these readings of Indian political economy provide powerful insights. Nonetheless, Bardhan's account of structural conflicts marginalises human agency in the unfolding rivalries of class and sector. It also ignores critical societal factors such as caste, region, or language that influence political decision making processes. His

¹³ The state-sponsored consolidation and elimination of rural indebtedness was, interestingly, an idea first introduced by the British colonial government in the 1930s, the memory of which, arguably, persists to this day.

structural approach provides us with a critical analytical apparatus to help understand the material bases of political power. But that structural analysis needs to be grounded in the historical reality of long term processes leading to the formation and dismantling of social classes. More importantly, this model needs to incorporate resistance from subaltern social groups both at an everyday level and in terms of critical policy events. Rudolph's historically contingent model is arguably still more problematic when it comes to explaining the complexity of Indian politics. For example, the Rudolphs ignore the seminal role that agrarian class conflicts play in shaping politics in India. Such conflicts are articulated in diverse ways. The street level agitations of rich peasants in Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra thus had a deep impact on the policies of the state. They inserted themselves into political patronage networks and important politicians such as Charan Singh and Devi Lal built their careers in Uttar Pradesh and Haryana on the basis of the articulation of these new agrarian interests. These rich peasant groups and their leaders transformed themselves into powerful power brokers. They very effectively illustrate the manner in which the apparent paradoxes and crises of Indian politics are no more than the expression of long-standing dialectical and dialogical process of engagement by different actors in political society.

Atul Kohli's influential work on *The State and Poverty in India* (1987) provides us with a nuanced model of the Indian polity. Kohli argues that in developing economies propertied classes impose their demands on the state through their control over productive resources. States that could insulate themselves from the pressures of propertied interest groups were more likely to be able to reach their developmental goals. The nature of the state's ability to rule crucially hinges upon the regime types that organise political rule. In a democratic society, party political configurations constitute regimes. According to Kohli, the nature of the leadership, the

ideology of the ruling party, and its organisational structure critically influence a regime's ability to implement developmental policies for the poor. By engaging in a comparative study of West Bengal under the CPI (M), Uttar Pradesh under the Janata Party, and Karnataka under Devraj Urs, he argues that the CPI (M) with its pro-poor political ideology, disciplined organisational structure and stable leadership was able to penetrate the countryside more profoundly. It was therefore far more effectively able to implement pro-poor policies such as land reforms, central government financed programs for the improvement of the living standard of small farmers, and wage and employment schemes for landless workers. This was particularly so when their efforts were compared those of the faction-ridden, rural elite dominated Janata Party. Though Devraj Urs' Janata government shared with the CPI (M) government a pro-poor ideology, it had comparatively a far less impressive record in implementing pro-poor policies because of the weak organisational structure of the party. He thus concluded that the Left of centre political parties could implement pro-poor policies far more effectively than any other.

In a similar fashion, in a following study on the gradual decline in the state's ability to govern and maintain the rule of law entitled *Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability* (1991), Kohli directed his investigations at three levels: the district, regional state, and nation with a focus on leadership. In selecting districts he deliberately followed Myron Weiner's earlier study *Party Building in a New Nation* and thus looked at five districts (Belgaum in Karnataka, Khaira in Gujarat, Guntur in Andhra Pradesh, Madurai in Tamil Nadu, and Calcutta in West Bengal), he then looked at three states - West Bengal, Bihar and Gujarat - and finally looked at the leadership of Rajiv Gandhi in terms of his failure to implement policies of liberalisation, organisational reform of the ruling party and finally his handling of

Punjab crisis. According to Kohli, the systematic intervention by the state in the economy and its inclination to influence the process of allocation resources led to competition among interest groups to influence the decision-making process of the state. The continuous erosion of social hierarchy has further increased collective demands and pressures upon the government. In response to this situation, leaders resorted to populism and mobilised social groups whose demands they knew they would not be in a position to satisfy. This populism undermined the long-term credibility and planning of political parties. Again Kohli's research indicated that CPI (M) in West Bengal was far more successful in establishing a party organisation that could direct popular pressures into building new institutional infrastructures that would enable better governance.

Kohli provided a new analytical focus on the political party and its role in managing economics, providing stability in terms of law and order, and innovating new policies. Yet Kohli's highly sophisticated and nuanced interpretation of Indian politics ignores how a political party develops the capability to deliver such development goals. In Bengal the Left movement developed such capabilities through participation in popular social movements and by translating this social capital into governance after accessing political power. Thus it is important to see how political parties are embedded within longer term changing social relationships as much as how they are produced by ideology and by able leadership. Societal structures and human agency interact with each other in reshaping politics. Neither of these relationships is static, nor are they divorced from one another. State policies alone do not create demand groups. Rather developments within society lead to the formation of social networks and alliances that seek to influence state policies, and state policies then further empowered social groups.

So far the literature surveyed focuses on the role played by indigenous factors playing in shaping Indian political economy. But a crucial study by Francine Frankel, *India's Green Revolution* (1971), demonstrated how developments within Indian political economy were influenced by influences from abroad. Francine Frankel's study of high politics in relation to economic policies present us with a more nuanced picture of how the gradual abandoning of Nehruvian institutional reforms were informed by resistance from local elites as well as by international pressures. Frankel argued that during the first five-year plan Nehru directed policies towards the development of agriculture. He promoted rural government bodies based on universal suffrage, multipurpose co-operative societies, and financial support for community self help organizations. After the modest success of the first plan, faced with resource constraints, the government moved in the direction of rapid industrialisation. But the low level of state investment in agriculture, the failure to implement land reforms, and the slow growth in productivity undermined the overall drive for industrialisation. Frankel here brilliantly brings forth the structural constraints built into India's constitution in relation to agriculture. Agriculture remained a state subject and state governments were beholden towards landed elites who supplied resources and political muscle to the ruling party. According to Frankel, under Lal Bahadur Shastri the government of India increased investments in agriculture but concentrated on productivity. The power of the already feeble planning commission was trimmed and the government invited private capital to play a meaningful role in industrial expansion. Frankel here identifies two key factors in policy change. First, the World Bank pressured the Shastri government (1964-65) to initiate economic reforms for higher food grain production. Meanwhile state leaders persuaded the central leaders to abandon land reforms as a goal for agricultural development. Soon US President Johnson's administration, using the leverage of American food aid,

further pushed India into abandoning institutional reform projects in favour of technical solutions to raise agricultural production. Francine's work provides with the much needed international dimension as to why India's redistributive development goals were abandoned. Of course recent researches further established that planners were not at all powerful under Nehru and that the Congress made historic compromises in 1948 by restraining labour and allowing conservative proprietary interests to dictate terms to the central government¹⁴. However, this process clearly was profoundly reinforced due to international pressures in the 1960s.

Two subsequent works on political economy further provide us with a focus on rural society and the political economy of agricultural management. Ron Herring's *Land to the Tiller* (1984), for example, provided us with a detailed explanation as to why certain types of policies were designed and the reasons for their lack of implementation. He focused his attention on land reform policies through an explanation of three different types of land reform: tenure reform policies, land ceiling based redistributive policies, and land to the tiller policies. Land reform in poor countries remained the corner stone of agricultural development with the aim of achieving both higher productivity and social justice. The latter provided regimes with political legitimacy in the eyes of the peasantry. According to Herring, land reforms failed because the existing social structures and state organisations remained captured by the landed elites and reproduced social inequity. He further explained this by highlighting the concept of the 'embedded bureaucracy'. Bureaucrats, a privileged stratus in the society, were invariably tied to landed elites. Either they came from land-holding social classes or they themselves aspired to become landed elites as land-holding provided security and social status in a predominantly

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agrarian society. Bureaucracy thus remained tied to land-holding elites through shared economic interests and social aspirations and sabotaged land reforms through corrupt practices. Like Atul Kohli, Herring argues that left of centre political parties can play a critical role in implementing redistributive reforms. In the case of Kerala the undivided CPI and later CPI (M) enacted the most radical land legislation that redefined the nature and formation of classes and direction of rural class conflicts. He thus claims that legal enactments effectively transformed both the interests and actions of social groups. This is an interesting claim but the fact remains that in most cases laws alone provided inadequate to the task of implementing land reform. Indeed, on the contrary, laws could become a radical force only when backed by democratising social movements headed by committed political parties.

Another important thesis that implicitly sought to provide an alternative to Bardhan, Frankel, Kohli and Ron Herring's class-based reading of rural politics was provided by Asutosh Varshney in *Democracy, Development, and the Countryside: Urban-Rural Struggles in India* (1995). Following Michael Lipton's notion of urban bias in the development process, Varshney highlights the sectoral struggle between rural and urban India. He assumes a hypothetical unity in rural interests and proceeds to analyse it in terms of the rural-urban divide in Indian politics. Between chapter 2 and chapter 5 he provides a history of India's agricultural policies: the shift in the agricultural policies in India in the mid 60s, the growing government intervention in input and output markets, the birth and consolidation of the rural lobby, and the diverse types of party, non-party and bureaucratic forums that played a critical role in effecting agricultural policy change. Thus Varshney's abiding concern was to explain why the rural sector did not become a predominant player in Indian politics. Following the famous assertion of Barrington Moore that democracies were established

through the obliteration of the peasantry he starts with the exceptional case of India's rise as a peasant democracy. But he attributes the failure of the rural sectors to politicise itself to the urban bias of Marxist leaders like Nehru.

The next section in Varshney's study examines the rise of rural sectoral politics in India from the late 1970s. He claims that this was exceptional in the history of industrial transformation. He further argues that despite the large-scale mobilisation of rural interests, the rural sector did not achieve much in terms of economic gains. This he attributed to the divergence between economic and political interests. Yet he claims that there did exist from some time a rural bias in India's economic policies, which led to the rural sector gaining in terms of subsidies for farm output in a situation of production surpluses, relatively low taxation, and even the benefit of substantial loan remissions during the Janata Dal regime in 1990. More importantly, rural food prices did not fall despite an increase in government stocks of surplus food grains. This obviously implied that through government food subsidies the richer segments amongst rural producers could resist falling prices and gain at the expense of poor rural workers (amounting to some 60% of rural society) who depended on the market for access to food products.

The problem with Varshney's thesis is his construction of the notion of a single, unitary rural sector. The rural sector has always been divided in terms of class, caste, region and religion. Varshney's final chapter pays inadequate attention to this. Indeed, to avoid the inevitable reality of class, caste, and regional fault lines in rural society, which constituted a fundamental axis to Indian politics, Varshney posits an entirely imagined reality of unified rural interests to simplify the task of analysis. He further omits to explain what constitutes urban interests and urban interest groups in India.

Conclusion

This survey of classics in political science literature on India between the late 1950s and late 1990s establishes a clear pattern in the range of approaches used by political scientists to understand Indian politics. Political scientists have used ready-made theoretical lenses to understand Indian society. Politics they often presumed was based upon the single institutional edifice of society. Instead of viewing institutions as deeply embedded within Indian social structures, institutions were provided with a life of their own and were attributed with the ability to change society. Except for the writings of a few scholars, who use neo-Marxist templates, societal contradictions were presumed to be emanating entirely from state policies. When the modernisation of society through political institutions increasingly appeared to be untenable, political scientists sought to view India through paradoxes and even constructed homogenous social entities such as 'the rural interest', in defiance of the evidence from empirical reality. India thus had to be invented and reinvented as diverse forms of political movements contesting for political power, with political formations emerging in one historical conjecture and then dissolving in the next when faced with the social contradictions that brought them into existence in the first place.

The fluidity perceived by political scientists is expressed in terms of the complexity of Indian society and its multiple forms of transition over nearly six decades under the impact of global, local, social, economic and cultural forces. It would certainly be mistaken to argue that there is a unidirectional flow in terms of societal change in India. Democracy in a predominantly agrarian society will be marked by resource constraints that generate diverse societal responses and can be shaped by these societal responses in a way that might not fit into existing theoretical lenses. But rather than

using ready-made theoretical constructs, it should be possible instead to explore Indian politics in terms of the social analysis of the historical unfolding of events. Theories could then be used to interrogate historical processes and historical evidence could be used to interrogate theories.

National security is a key term often referenced, but poorly defined, in many theoretical constructions of the Indian polity. It would arguably be better to redeploy the term to understand societal security. The processes that lead to the creation of a socially just, politically inclusive, and culturally tolerant society can only be understood through a nuanced historical interpretation of social changes within a temporal framework. Humans operate within structural constraints but they also impose their imprints on structures. The security desired by individuals needs to be understood in terms of their agency to engage with historically given structural constraints and their ability to transcend them. Dominance and hegemony, furthermore, cannot be understood without an examination of subaltern resistance and its imprints upon society as whole. A dialogue between historians and political scientists, through the medium of contemporary history, could potentially therefore provide a superior instrument with which to understand the ability of citizens to mitigate and transform society and the politics that represents it.

The historian Ramachandra Guha has remarked that historians have a preference for writing about the colonial era, since this was a time when events within even the most isolated rural setting could easily be seen to be connected to global events and grand historical arguments about the development of colonialism, capitalism, and the national movement. The history of politics post-1947 is by contrast, at least until the era of globalisation takes off in the twenty-first century, an apparently more parochial affair. It may be

argued, however, that this appearance is merely a consequence of the way in which post-independence politics has been represented in the writings of functionalist political analysts. By abandoning the study of politics in the late twentieth century through preference, and by citing the difficulties of writing history without access to the usual form of archival sources, historians have evaded the need for methodological innovation that have been more squarely faced by the social sciences. The time has now come for historians to face up to the challenge of interpreting the last half-century of Indian history with the same acuity and depth that they have explored the colonial era. This would be a great service not only to history, but also to the field of South Asian studies as a whole.
